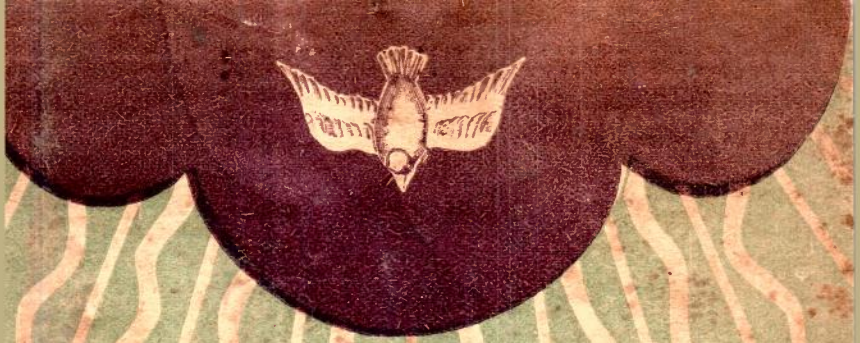

THE SACRAMENT OF CATHOLIC ACTION

BY THE

REV. FR. J. PUTZ, S.J.

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The Sacrament of Catholic Action

(A Study on Confirmation)

BY THE REV. FR. J. PUTZ, S.J.

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The sacrament of Confirmation is coming once more into its rights. For a long time it has been the least appreciated of all the sacraments. Yet the mere fact that it is conferred only by the Bishop would be enough to suggest that it has some great significance. Of late its purpose has come to be expressed in the phrase "The sacrament of Catholic Action" and, thanks to this slogan, interest has suddenly swung back to its rich and inspiring meaning in the Christian scheme of life. It looks as if Confirmation were being re-discovered by theologians, preachers and catechists.

The 'discovery' however is only beginning. In most Christians the consciousness of their Confirmation is far from having its full energizing influence. Preachers and catechists are mostly vague in their explanations. The theologians themselves are not as yet completely agreed on the nature of the connection between Confirmation and Catholic Action. The following pages may help some readers to get a clearer view of this very practical question.

The Question stated—Confirmation has always been considered as a complement of Baptism, as making the baptized a complete Christian, *Christianum perfectum.* Being a complement of Baptism, its meaning must be understood by its relation to Baptism. The question

then is: what does it add to Baptism? We know that Baptism remits sin, infuses grace, incorporates into Christ and into the Church, gives help for a good life. What more is needed to make a full Christian? What necessity is there to receive Confirmation over and above Baptism?

Starting from the analogy between the life of grace and the life of nature, we may conceive the relation between Baptism and Confirmation as analogous to that between childhood and manhood. As Baptism is a regeneration, a birth to the supernatural life, so Confirmation is the growth, the adolescence by which the Christian attains maturity and becomes able to perform "the perfect actions of a man"[1]. Thus Confirmation marks the spiritually adult, it is the *sacrament of Christian manhood*; it 'confirms' or strengthens the Christian for the exercise of a man's activity in the spiritual life.

This general statement calls for a further determination. For it raises the question: *Which are those actions* proper to the Christian adult? What is that special activity for which Confirmation ordains and strengthens the Christian? This concrete question brings us to the heart of our problem, but also to the parting of the roads. If we examine the answers commonly given, we discover two different conceptions of Confirmation.

I. CONFIRMATION AND THE SPIRITUAL COMBAT

1. There is first a very broad and general way of conceiving the purpose of this sacrament: it is said to

1. ST. THOMAS, *Summa theol.*, III, 72, 1 (cf. 72, 8 ad 2: why a child can receive it).; Catechism of Trent, II, 3, n. 5. The same analogy is found already in a letter of Joannes Diaconus: Migne, P.L., t. 59, col. 406-7.

confer the Holy Ghost in order to strengthen the Christian for the spiritual life. Greek theology has scarcely gone beyond this general affirmation[2]. The Latin name of 'Confirmation' does not take us any further: it merely expresses the same idea of strengthening, and it was natural that some writers should attribute to the sacrament this effect in all its generality. As the West is fond of warlike metaphors, the explanation of the Latin theologians is generally clothed in terms of soldiering. Since "the life of man upon earth is a warfare", the child when he grows up must learn to fight and conquer. Confirmation makes him a soldier of Christ; it arms him for the fight: it is the *sacrament of the spiritual warfare*[3]. This doctrine is well expressed in the famous decretal of the Pseudo-Melchiades[4]:

"Because during the whole course of our present life we have to walk in the midst of invisible enemies and dangers, we are regenerated by Baptism unto life and after Baptism we are confirmed unto the fight (*in baptismo regeneramur ad vitam, post baptismum confirmamur ad pugnum*). In Baptism we are washed clean, after Baptism we are strengthened. Although the gifts of regeneration suffice for those who die soon, those who are to live require the aids of confirmation."

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2. The Greek writers merely expound the symbolism of "unction". The great theologian Nicolas Cabasilas (†1363) mentions two effects: "The Holy Ghost is really given: to some, that they may be able to do good to others and 'edify the Church'...to others, that they themselves may become better, eminent in piety, chastity, charity." (*De vita in Christo*: Migne, P.G., t. 150, col. 576).

3. Similarly St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Catech. 21,4: "Having put on the panoply of the Holy Ghost, you stand firm against the hostile power" (cf. Ephes. 6, 11).

4. Migne, P.L. 130, col. 241. It is an anonymous homily of the fifth century, which later (by the Pseudo-Isidorus) was attributed to Pope Melchiades, and enjoyed great authority with mediaeval theologians.

The same broad conception is found in most of our catechisms [5].

Where then, in this conception, does the apostolate and Catholic Action come in? Only indirectly or implicitly, in so far as it may be one among other duties of a Christian life, or in so far as it is one among other objects of the spiritual warfare.

2. The second conception holds that the definition of Confirmation as "the sacrament of the spiritual warfare" is too broad in its generality, and that, in the light of Catholic tradition, it can be narrowed down to one specific object, viz. the apostolate. In this view, Confirmation marks and arms the Christian, not for the spiritual life and fight in general, but specifically and directly for the Christian apostolate; it must be defined as the *sacrament of the lay apostolate.* It confers upon every Christian the express call to the apostolate and strengthens him for that precise purpose.

Is such a restriction of the object of Confirmation legitimate? It is the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas, and we shall show there are good reasons to justify it.

* * *

II. CONFIRMATION AND THE APOSTOLATE

Some Theological Reasons

1. We may first show the probability of the second conception by two theological arguments.

5. "If you ask children what is the duty of a soldier of Christ, they will probably reply 'to fight the devil and all his temptations', which of course adds nothing to the duties of a baptized person. The idea that they have a *duty* to fight for the salvation of others seems to occur to them. A soldier is one who fights for others; a soldier of Christ has the duty and commission to strive for the salvation of other people." (*The Clergy Review*, May 1941, p., 427) Cf., below, note 8.

(a) *From the relation of Confirmation to Baptism.*— We know that Confirmation completes Baptism with a view to certain actions proper to the adult. Now what is the characteristic of adult age?—One obvious characteristic is that the man has to fight his way himself, while the child is protected by others; or in terms of spiritual life, when the child grows up he has to defend his baptismal gift against his passions, the world and the devil. From this fact some have rushed to the conclusion that Confirmation is meant to strengthen the child for this struggle. But they forget that Baptism itself has armed him for the spiritual fight. For in the present order every grace, and first of all baptismal grace, is not only *elevans*, but *sanans* as well: it raises the soul to a participation in the divine life, but also ensures all the helps necessary for the living of that life (cf. the doctrine of "sacramental grace"). Hence when the baptized reaches the age of reason, he has but to exercise the potentialities of his baptismal grace (which is further strengthened by the eucharistic Food); for the preservation and growth *of his personal life* he needs no new sacrament (besides the Eucharist), except in special circumstances for which Extreme Unction and other sacraments have been instituted.

Confirmation, then, must have a different and very special purpose; it must be concerned with some new aspect of life. As a matter of fact, the child when growing up has to face a new form of life—the *social life*. So far he lived for himself; now he has to take his place in society and shoulder his social responsibilities; so far he has been receiving, now he must also give. In the spiritual realm, too, he grows out of the stage of a purely individual life to realize his position

and duties as a member, as a part; he must take his share in the social life and action of the Church, he must become apostolic. Confirmation marks and arms him for the apostolate. St. Thomas is emphatic on this point.

"The spiritual warfare in which man fights for *his own salvation* is pressing on all. But it is *not for this* that the sacrement of Confirmation is given..." *IV Sent.*, dist. 7, q. 2, a. 1, sol. 1, ad 1.—Cf. *Summa Theol.*, III, 72/5 ad 1.

"As stated above, in this sacrament the fulness of the Holy Ghost is given for the spiritual strength which belongs to the perfect age. Now when man comes to the pefect age, he begins at once to act on others (*communicare actiones suas ad alios*); whereas until then he lives an individual life, as it were, confined to himself (*quasi singulariter sibi ipsi vivit*)." III, 72/2.

And again: "It is evident, from a comparison with the life of the body, that the action which is proper to man immediately after birth, is different from the action which is proper to him when he has come to perfect age. And therefore by the sacrament of Confirmation man is given a spiritual power in respect of sacred actions other than those in respect of which he receives power in Baptism. For in Baptism he receives power to do those things *which pertain to his own salvation*, forasmuch as he lives to himself (*prout scilicet secundum seipsum vivit*): whereas in Confirmation he recives power to do those things which pertain to the spiritual combat with the enemies of the Faith." III, 72/5.

These texts are clear. For St. Thomas's Confirmation is the sacrament of the social awakening and the social destiny of the Christian. It prepares him for the social action he has to exercise in the interest of the Faith. In this restricted and very definite sense it is the 'sacrament of the spiritual warfare', the 'sacrament of responsibility'.

(*b*) *From the fact that Confirmation imprints a 'character'* we get another strong argument in favour of the apostolic conception of this sacrament—According to the doctrine of St. Thomas universally accepted by the theologians, the sacramental characters are various degrees of participation in the priesthood of Christ (cf. *The Clergy Monthly*, vol. IV, p. 225). Each character confers upon the Christian a certain official *status in the visible Church*, by which he is in a special way connected with sacerdotal office of Christ the Head. Baptism confers the status of a member, with the right and power of sharing in the social life and spiritual treasures of the Church, particularly in the sacrifice and the sacraments. By Holy Orders some are set aside to teach the faith and administer the sacraments in the name and power of Christ.

Therefore Confirmation also must confer some office within the visible Church. Now if its end were the member's personal good, it would not give a new 'ecclesiastical status', a new participation in Christ's priesthood, distinct from that conferred by Baptism. It must confer a new office, not merely receptive but active, something halfway between the initial participation in the priesthood conferred by Baptism and the full participation given by Holy Orders. This is the apostolate, the defence and spreading of the Church through which Christ exercises His sacerdotal action.

Confirmation, then, has a great meaning. Baptism makes us share in the fruits of Christ's salvation; Confirmation makes us co-saviours with Christ. By this sacrament every Christian is specially called, solemnly ordained and commissioned, for the apostolate. By accepting the sacrament he accepts his

apostolic vocation. The character marks him as an official soldier of the Church.[6]

Arguments from Tradition

2. Theological arguments help up better to understand the truth; but the ultimate test of orthodoxy is the *tradition of the Catholic Church.* This does not mean however that every truth must be found clearly and expressly stated from the beginning. A truth may at first have been implicit or taught in a different form or in a more general form. By theological and dogmatic progress it may acquire greater precision and distinction. As for the truth we are here examining, viz. the direct connection between Confirmation and the apostolate, we find it clearly in the Western theology (which in this matter is more evolved than the Greek theology), though under different forms and expressions and more clearly at some periods than at others.

HOLY SCRIPTURE already suggests it. In the New Testament the Christian apostolate is deeply and beautifully expressed as *witnessing to the truth*: the divine truth, which is the fountain of life, must be proposed to the faith and love of mankind. The Saviour sums up His own mission in these words: "For this am I come into the world, that I may witness to the truth" (John 18/37). His witness is to be continued by His disciples, with the special

6. Hence "this sacrament is fittingly conferred by Bishops only. For they are the commanding officers of the Christian army: and in wordly warfare it belongs to the commander-in-chief to choose those whom he appoints to military service" (ST. THOMAS, *Contra Gentiles*, IV, 60). The Bishop comes only for the big occasions—when something is to be done concerning the public interest of religion to consecrate a church, to ordain the priests, and also to consecrate the lay apostles.

assistance of the Holy Ghost. It is striking that the pentecostal promise is always expressly connected with the witness the apostles will have to bear before the world.

"Ye shall receive power from the coming of the Holy Spirit upon you, and ye shall be my *witnesses*...unto the end of the earth" (*Acts*, 1/8).

"And He said to them.. that in His name should be preached repentance and forgiveness of sins unto all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. Yourselves are *witnesses* of these things. And behold, I send forth upon you the promise of my Father. Do ye bide in the city, until ye be clothed with power from on high" (*Luke*, 24/47-49; cf. 12/12). "My Father shall send you..the Spirit of truth.. He shall teach you all things, and bring to your mind all the things that I have said to you.. He shall *witness* concerning Me; and ye also are *witnesses*.." (*John*, 14/16.26; 15/26; 16/13).

The effect of Pentecost clearly shows that it was primarily a confirmation for the apostolate. The Holy Ghost had been given to the disciples before. Pentcost gave them the fulness of the Spirit for the great work that was entrusted to them: they received the Holy Ghost and immediately started giving witness to Christ. The divine Spirit illuminated and strengthened them wonderfully, besides bestowing on them apostolic chrisms such as the gift of tongues. He accompanied them in their apostolate. When persecuted by the Jews, they prayed, "and they where filled with the Holy Spirit and they *spoke the word of God with boldness*" (*Acts*, 4/31). In the Holy Ghost they fearlessly bear witness to the saving death and resurrection of their Master; for "we are *witnesses* of these things, and the Holy Spirit likewise, whom God has given to them that obey Him" (*Acts*, 5/32).

Now it has always been held that the sacrament of Confirmation is our Pentecost. We have first received the Holy Ghost in Baptism. Confirmation has a special meaning and purpose, the same as the coming of the Holy Ghost over the first disciples; it is the sacrament of the Christian apostolate. Every Christian receives a share in the apostolic mission and in the Pentecostal Gift.

THE FATHERS OF THE CHURCH speak much of the "Christian warfare", which naturally, in those times of persecution, chiefly meant the confession of the faith and its supreme act, martyrdom. The Pastors remind the faithful that they are made soldiers of Christ and marked with His "character" by the rites of initiation. When they thus refer to the "character of Christ", they do not clearly distinguish between Baptism and Confirmation, as the two were always given together. Tertullian however must have been thinking of Confirmation when he added: "You fight under the eyes of Christ who has anointed you with the Spirit" (*Ad martyres*, 3).

The early THEOLOGIANS are more explicit. In the eighth century Alcuin expressly states the doctrine that the direct purpose of Confirmation is not individual perfection but the apostolate (Migne, P.L. 100, c. 292). His teaching on this point was repeated, almost literally, by Rabanus Maurus; "Lastly, the Bishop by the imposition of hands confers the Holy Ghost, that the Christian may be strengthened by the Holy Ghost *for the purpose of preaching to others the gift he himself has received in Baptism*" (P.L. 107, 314). This striking text seems to have become classical; for the great doctors of the twelfth century, when explaining the meaning of Confirmation, simply quote the words of Rabanus:

thus Hugh of St. Victor (or rather his disciple: P.L. 176, 138), and even Peter Lombard whose work for a number of generations remained the text-book commented on by professors of theology (P.L. 192, 855).

However, the formula of Alcuin-Rabanus does not seem to have survived long beyond the twelfth century. The masters of the thirteenth, such as St. Bonaventure and especially St. Thomas, substituted another expression: Confirmation, they say, ordains and strengthens the Christian for the *public confession* of the faith he has received in Baptism. Probably the formula '*preaching* the faith' seemed to them inappropriate or too narrow to express the apostolic function of the laity. 'Public confession' is more general and more appropriate, and keeps more closely to the patristic expression. But the fundamental idea is the same, it refers to that aspect of the Christian's duty which is more adequately expressed by the modern formula of 'lay apostolate'. Confirmation is not meant to provide for the individual salvation of a man; it gives him a social mission or office (see the texts quoted p. 6): *eum instituit pro fide Christi propugnatorem* (*Contra Gentiles*, IV, 60). The essential duty of this office (*ex officio characteris*) is the public and fearless confession of his faith, against all the enemies of the Church, all the unchristian forces at work in the world. Such a confession is perhaps the best way of *preaching* and spreading the faith (*spiritualia in notitiam ducit per eorum fortem confessionem*: IV Sent. dist. 7, q. 2, a. 1, sol. 1).[7]

7. This remark seems to show the mind of St. Thomas passing from the idea of *preaching* (which he found in the text of Peter Lombard on which he was commenting) to that, more general, of *confessing* the faith.—See also the analysis St. Thomas makes of the apostolic meaning of the Confirmation rites: *Contra Gentiles*, IV, 60 *Summa theol.*, III, q. 72, aa. 2, 4 & 9.

The new formula completely prevailed after St. Thomas; it was adopted by the theologians, officially sanctioned by the 'Decree for the Armenians' (*Denzinger*, 697), and passed into the text-books and catechisms.[8] But too often its meaning became vague and uninspiring. It was merged into the general idea of 'spiritual warfare', and this broad conception of Confirmation became prevalent at a time when the conviction of the apostolic function of the laity was, for all practical purposes, dead. In recent years, with the rise of Catholic Action, we have come to a clearer perception of the part that the lay apostolate has to play in the life of the Church. As a consequence the sacramental foundation of this important aspect of the Christian vocation has been studied with renewed interest. Pius XI has shown the way. Here is a passage from his letter to the Patriarch of Lisbon (A.A.S. 1934, p. 628):

"The faithful should be told—what many still do not know—that the apostolate is one of the inherent duties of Christian life.... A careful study proves that it is the sacraments of *Baptism and Confirmation* which impose among other obligations this one of the apostolate, i.e. the spiritual help of our neighbour. *Confirmation* makes us soldiers of Christ, and a soldier does not fight for himself but for others. *Baptism*, too, though perhaps *not so evidently*, imposes a duty upon us, since by it we become members of the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ. Among the members of that Body as of every other body there must reign a unity of interest and a

8. The recent American catechism "Catholic Faith", following Cardinal Gasparri's catechism, teaches that Confirmation makes us soldiers of Christ, *ready to show our faith in word and in deed.* The doctrine however is not yet logically worked out: thus the question 'why Catholics should be confirmed' gets this answer: "because confirmation strengthens us to attain salvation more easily." Also the explanation of the 'character' is still quite unsatisfactory.

mutual exchange of life: . . (Rom. 12/5). Each of us must help the other, none should be inactive, but all should give as well as receive. And just as every Christian enjoys the supernatural life which flows in the veins of the Mystical Body of Christ, so too every Christian should transfuse it into others who either have none or only a modicum."

Concluding remarks

We can add only two brief remarks that will help to avoid confusions.

1. The Pope rightly bases the duty of the apsotolate on both *Baptism and Confirmation*. But obviously some distinctions are necessary (and they are indicated by the Pope himself) in order to safeguard the formal and specific purpose of each sacrament

(*a*) BAPTISM has for its *direct* purpose to make the individual a member of the Church, enabling him to share in her life and spiritual treasures. But membership necessarily entails certain obligations towards the society, such as obedience, charity, also good example and zeal for the common good. Hence Baptism already imposes a general apostolic duty but *indirectly* or implicitly.

(*b*) CONFIRMATION is intended *directly* and expressly to consecrate and strengthen the baptized for that social service which was already an implicit obligation of his membership. To use a comparison found in St. Thomas: every citizen is bound to help his country when necessity arises; but the soldiers are specially called and armed for that purpose. So also Confirmation adds to the general apostolic duty implied by Baptism an explicit mission and formal

ordination to the apostolate. Now the primary form of the apostolate is the witness of a Christian life. Hence Confirmation strengthens the Christian also for his personal sanctification as a means or condition for the apostolate.

In brief: Baptism aims directly at personal sanctification, indirectly at the apostolate. Confirmation aims directly at the apostolate, indirectly at personal sanctification. The two sacraments are intimately related, but their specific purposes remain distinct.[1]

2. *Apostolate, Catholic Action, and the Church.*— Confirmation does not confer any special *authority*: apostolic authority is vested in the Hierarchy of the Church alone. Confirmation confers a *mission*, the general mission to exercise the lay apostolate according to one's opportunities. This general apostolate is Catholic Action in the broad sense. Catholic Action in the strict sense requires a *special* mission, thanks to which the lay apostolate becomes a formal participation in the hierarchic apostolate of the Church. By the character of Confirmation, which gives him the "ecclesiastical status" of an apostle or soldier of

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1. This doctrine is confirmed by the recent encyclical of Pius XII on the Mystical Body of Christ. Explaining the purpose of the various sacraments, the Holy Father writes: "Through the waters of *Baptism* those who have been born into this mortal life are reborn from the death of sin and made members of the Church; at the same time they are stamped with a spiritual seal which makes them capable to receive the other sacraments. By the chrism of *Confirmation* the faithful are given added strength to protect and defend (*strenue tueantur ac defendant*) Mother Church and the faith received from her."

Thus the purpose of Confirmation is to give strength, not in general for one's own Christian life, but specifically for the fulfilment of one's duty towards the Church and the faith, i.e., for the 'apostolate'.

Christ, the Christian is "proximately disposed" to receive and follow any special call from the Hierarchy.

We think that these necessary distinctions give a complete and coherent doctrine of the sacramental background of the lay apostolate and Catholic Action. Some points are still relatively obscure: we must await further theological progress.

(*From the Clergy Monthly, April 1942*)

SUPERIORUM PERMISSU

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✠ JAMES,

Bishop of Trichinopoly

Last Message of Pope Pius XI

To the Bishops of the Philippine Islands, published in the **Osservatore Romano** *on the day of the Pope's death Feb. 10th 1939*

"Now we must say something which our experience already long has taught us, namely that in all countries the fact of Catholic Action is in the hands of the clergy. "*In manibus tuis sortes meae.*" Hence the clergy must know both the theory and the practice of this new form of apostolate which forms part of the sacred ministry.

"Aware of your paternal solicitude for the salvation of souls, we feel sure you will take steps that all your priests can be thus prepared:—the young levites in the seminary during the course of pastoral theology, of which Catholic Action must nowadays form an integral part (just as the classical forms of apostolate)—and the priests already occupied in the ministry, by means of special courses, of prayers and studies, or of any other proceedings which your zeal will suggest.

"Formed in this way, the priests—and we hope it will be the same for the religious—will make it a point to consecrate themselves to the difficult work of the spiritual and practical preparation of the laity for Catholic Action.

"It is a work of very great merit, since it requires continual but noble exertions, that will be largely compensated for by the zeal with which these new collaborators will generously and faithfully cooperate with the ministers of God for the conquest and the spiritual progress of souls."

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